

Sunday 31 May 2020 Pentecost

The Very Reverend Nicholas Papadopoulos, Dean of Salisbury

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12.3b-13, John 20: 19-23

The violent wind and tongues of flame, so strange to Western ears and twenty-first century minds, would have been instantly recognizable to the close-knit group of men and women who were “all together in one place”. Steeped in their people’s history, immersed in their holy writings, to them the wind and fire would have meant one thing only: that their God was in the building; that they were in God’s immediate presence.

Time and again in their national story God had made Godself known to them through such signs. When they were wandering in the wilderness, looking for a land to call home, God had led them through the night in a pillar of fire. When Moses brought his people to the foot of Mount Sinai “the LORD descended upon it in fire”. When the prophet Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to prove that their god was indeed God, it was fire falling from heaven that vindicated his challenge.

Fire and wind in a place of meeting: unnatural to us, unless in these days they are the work of Zoombombers; unnatural to Peter and the others, too: unnatural, but unmistakable. Their God was in the building; they were in God’s immediate presence.

It was what theologians call a theophany, a self-communication by God to humankind. It took place on the Day of Pentecost, a day which marked an earlier theophany, the giving of the Law to Moses. In a theophany it’s not that God shows up, although God undoubtedly does. It’s that God shows up and shows us; shows us something. At Mount Sinai God discloses the divine purpose through the divine Law; when the group are all together in one place God discloses the divine purpose through the signs of wind, and fire, and foreign tongues.

We can read the Law; we must read the signs. Wind; fire; tongues: I suggest – a God who animates, who forms, who unites.

“And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house”. “Wind” is one of the very first words associated with God in the Bible. The author of Genesis sketches an impression of the primeval soup: the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep but, he writes, “...a wind from God swept over the face of the waters”. God is present at the very beginning, before the very beginning. God is present to create something where there is nothing, God is present to bring order where there is chaos, God is present to give life where there is no life. So when in John’s account Jesus meets the disciples on the day of his resurrection he greets them and he breathes on them. “Receive the Holy Spirit”. It’s the same creating, order-bringing, life-giving breath, and on the Day of Pentecost it’s poured out on the room. God, present amidst the primeval soup, God the spark of life, God the very essence of being, God who animates all things: this God is in the room.

“Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them”. In Luke’s Gospel John the Baptist describes himself as coming ahead of one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire; now, in Luke’s second book, Acts, the fire has come. It is

the fire of judgement, not of condemnation; it does not consume everything that stands in its path. But it tests and it tries, just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were tested and tried in the furnace of blazing fire. It is the refiner's fire of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, the fire that burns away the impurities, that reveals the true beauty that has been disfigured and hidden beneath the layers of dross and filth. Breathing upon the disciples Jesus shares with them his authority to forgive. The divine fire softens the hardest human heart; the divine fire living in the Twelve will declare that its work is done, that the sinner's true form has been realized, that contrition and repentance have been sealed by forgiveness. On the Day of Pentecost the divine fire is poured out upon the room. God who judges, God who cleanses, God who shapes and forms his people: this God is in the room.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability". If the wind and the fire hark back to Israel's history, the tongues address Israel's present. Gathered in Jerusalem are devout Jews from every corner of the known world: from Rome in the west, Africa in the south, and Arabia in the east. All can understand what is being said; none is excluded. And Peter reaches for the prophet Joel to set out what he believes has happened. The God who is in their midst knows no bounds. The Spirit is poured out on men and women, on slaves and on the free, on the young and on the old. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved". Everyone. When Jesus meets his disciples his first word is "Peace". He has been sent by the Father, he says: now he is sending them. On the Day of Pentecost the God of history is poured out upon the room. God who cannot be separated from the people he has made, God who makes no distinctions between those who call upon him, God who trusts those he sends and goes with them, God who unites: this God is in the room.

Wind, fire, tongues: God who animates, God who forms, God who unites. On the Day of Pentecost, this God is in the room. We cannot be all together in one place; but while we have been apart who can doubt that this God has been with us? Animating us in new ways of exploring faith, forming us as a dispersed community, uniting us despite the distance and the difficulties.

This God has been poured out upon the earth, and this God is in the building – it's just that we are the building. Amen.